



Aruba observes Dia di Betico with solemnity and celebration.

On Wednesday, January 25, Aruba celebrated two important events, the twenty-year anniversary of Status Aparte, or Independence from the Netherlands Antilles, and the birthday, in memoriam, of the man that was instrumental in obtaining it, Gilberto Francois "Betico" Croes. It was a day of solemn observance in the morning, and joyous celebration at night.

In the Plaza Betico Croes located behind the Cas di Cultura, local dignitaries gather in the morning to pay homage to the man that with the support of his party, MEP, worked tirelessly for Arubans to have the power of self-government. He was the first Aruban and Antillean to ever speak in a Dutch Meeting of Parliament, on November 14, 1978. His tireless efforts to see that Arubans had the right of self-determination posthumously earned him the official title of "El Libertador" as he died in 1986 from the consequences of an auto accident that prevented him from seeing the full realization of his dream, and Aruba independent from the other Antillean islands.

Aruba's Prime Minister Nel Oduber addressed the gathering at the morning ceremony, conducted by Randy Maduro, of the Himno y Bandera commission. He sadly remembered the man that was his political ally and close friend. Roberto Croes, poet and relative of Betico recited and original work composed for the occasion. It was a brief but heartfelt homage to the man considered most responsible for Aruba's growth and prosperity as an independent part of the Kingdom of Holland.

In contrast to the subdued atmosphere of the morning's memorial service, the Plaza Betico was vibrantly alive with music and festive activities to celebrate twenty years of Status Aparte on Wednesday evening. Booths providing local delicacies at such as "Soppi Laman" (local seafood soup,) homemade wine from Aruba, pastichies, and traditional baked goods at bargain prices did a brisk business amongst locals and island visitors. Internationally renowned Aruban artist Jenny Kock created beautiful pastels while children watched, and the evening was buoyant with the carnival atmosphere for which the island is famous.

The cultural celebration featured traditional entertainment by some of Aruba's finest performers including Edjean Semeleer, a popular local baritone accompanied by pianist Johnny Scharbaay. Alidia Wever, who has performed with the Alvin Alley dance troupe, complimented his singing with an original dance, which she choreographed for the occasion. Other noted performers such as Nico Connor on the Steel Pan, jazz performer Gerald Bislip, Jack Tromp, Gloria Vega, Rembert Ras, Omar Kock, Doedel Sofia, and Victor Camacho provided a memorable evening of entertainment for Parliament Members, Aruba's Governor Fredis Refunjol, and a plaza filled with people enjoying this special celebration.

Aruba's anniversary of Status Aparte is a momentous day for the island, which will always be tinged with a bit of sadness for the passing of this great leader of the community. It is appropriate that it be held on his birthday, as achieving independence for Aruba was a lifelong ambition for Betico Croes, for which he worked tirelessly.